

Foreword:

The following piece is the attempted writing-out of ideas that have circumnavigated my head for years, like a kid lapping a Wacky Warehouse after overdoing it on the E-numbers. And although it may seem it at times, it is not at all an attempt to be didactic. I would fall at the foot of that mountain. In the words of Josh Ritter: "all I know is what I know". In lieu of being didactic, I aim to be pedantic. To replicate the inordinate complexity of finding a sense of self-worth amongst the murky waters of stalling creativity. Or, at least, my experience of that.

I like to dive deep into the things I least understand. Not to cast a net or lay bait, but to shine a torch and see whether its beam can reach the surface.

The Creative's Self-Worth

By Tom Doona

"I spend so much time thinking about creativity that I forget to think creatively".

I wrote that line in 2016, at a time when my drive to create was stronger than it ever had been before. Creativity was my fiercest, most accessible, and arguably my only, form of genuine expression - and I had never before felt such an overbearing need to express. To package up and project the parts of my person that felt to be cornering me, keeping me at an iron arm's length from the things in the world that I most wanted to know. I had such a strong drive to create, and it was this creativity that I was banking on. But, as it so happened, that period was the least creative I can remember. I created nothing. I expressed nothing. All because I was too busy trying to.

When C.S. Lewis wrote "No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear", he hit the nail on the head. And that nail can be driven into so many surfaces, and it still holds. It is not only grief that feels so like fear. It is every emotion, every state, every feeling that wraps itself in the blanket of neighbouring emotions, states, feelings. Sewing its disguise just enough to protect itself behind the unassailable worth of all the things we feel - the things we try so hard not to question. Like a child hiding behind its mother to protect themselves from the harshness of the world; not because they see her as bulletproof, but because in her they see a softness that they can't fathom anyone ever trying to harm. Emotions become so hard to face up to because each one wears the mask of every other. Grief hides behind fear. Hate hides behind love. Weakness hides behind strength. And in 2016, when I wrote the above line, I was demonstrating another of these. One that maybe we don't often give enough mind to, because doing so can feel to be a triviality, a privilege. That of self-worth hiding behind creativity.

And the creative's self-worth is defined by productivity.

By 'the creative', I mean anyone with the creative itch. And those who do not at least partially fit within this category are few and far between. Because I don't just mean "create" in the archetypally artistic sense: writing, dancing, knitting, cooking. I mean the far-reaching, arguably universal, definition of "create" that is driven by the innate need to construct an external surface

of reflection for internal parts of us that not only introduce the world to us nakedly, but also help us leave our own tiny footprint on it. And that could well be through writing, dancing, knitting, cooking. But also through business management, personal care, educational practices, balancing books, sowing seeds. Whatever it is that we strive to put down as a metric of who we truly are. That is what defines the creative: the need to be seen through.

And this need can often feel burdensome, as though we are palming our own fate, or at least patting down our own path towards it. How do we want to be seen? If creativity strips us of everything but our own most honest valuation of ourselves, then it leaves us alone with the things that we value most. The things that we can only ever do two things with: accept, or lie about. The most assured and secure parts of our being that, in spite of ourselves, so often surface as insecurities. Creativity is the platform through which we best harness these, and that can feel weighty. Like folding yourself acute and standing on your own hands. Here is the crossroads of creativity, where you either find the force to pass pen across paper, or you see mountains in the folds of blank pages. And in 2016, it was at this crossroads that I was stalling. I felt I had the fuel to tell a thousand and one stories, but I couldn't muster up the courage to go as far as clicking the nib through the head of the pen. I thought my engine had plummeted through to the road surface. But actually, I just hadn't released the handbrake.

No one ever told me that blank pages felt so like failure.

But they do. Because, as I have by this point drilled in deeper than a bottomless borehole, creativity is a penetrative lens. It is the ideal instrument for being honest and giving the world a way in. And the creative who is failing to create can often feel as though they are failing. Failing at expressing, and even failing at being the most fulfilled form of themselves. This sounds like excessive existentialism and catastrophising; that is often exactly how it feels, as well. Creativity can feel like a privilege. Even just giving thought to creating in a world so full with belittlement and deconstruction can feel wrong. But beneath the overwhelming hustle and bustle of everyday complexities, being creative with and utilising our own individual complexities can be cathartic. It sends us inwards to a place where we feel a little less small – a little less helpless. So when we fail to bridge the gap to that place, that failure can feel all-encompassing. What seems small from the outside can make the outward perspective opaque. Dirty windows make life difficult to see (John Prine said that). So creativity is our Windex (I said that – I'm no Prine). And this all ties into general self-worth, general fulfilment, general mental health. Despite anything and everything outside of ourselves, it can feel really damn hard.

But if the creative does not put clippers to the wire and cut off the circuit before its current runs full circle, this can all become a self-perpetuating cycle. Because there is nothing more fundamental to the efficacy of a creative drive than the health of the creative. The natural response to a blank page is to dig ink a little deeper into the paper. The natural response to a blank Word document is to push down a little harder on the space bar. The natural response to a blank piece of sheet music is to pound a little firmer on the keys. The more we struggle to create, the more energy we expend on trying. The more of our time and focus we give to arching our backs and trying. Trying. Trying. Trying. This shifts our perspective, and the white spaces between untouched notepad lines look more and more like valleys, to which we feel we must give more and more of ourselves in order to fill. The cycle spins like a washing machine with a Bugatti engine. So much of our time and energy is then spent on cognising the concept of creativity. And in trying so hard to create, we forget to be creative.

Because it feels like the creative's self-worth is defined by productivity. But the opposite is true. Productivity is defined by the creative's self-worth.

With writing the original line in 2016, it was as though I was posing a question that I then set out to try and answer. Why, when I was trying so hard, was I not succeeding in being creative? But the journey to the answer was far from a treacherous one. In fact, it was similar to the journey from a full BLT to just the crispy leaves of lettuce (does that lighten the load a little?). The answer was right there in the middle of the question (the L means lettuce!). *I was trying so hard*. I was trying too hard. I was putting my back out trying to fan the flames, when what I really needed to do was throw another log into the belly of the fire. I was failing to create, and that felt so like failure. My creativity was hiding behind my unwavering drive to create. The child behind its Mother. And behind that creativity hid my general sense of self-worth, my general well-being, my general contentment. I didn't attribute such at the time (hindsight is 2020, 2016 was not) but my creativity was what I used to define how I felt. And somewhere in that mess of creative expression, I unwittingly loosened my grip on what it was I was trying to express. The priority became the periphery; I prioritised expression over experience. But that candle burns a short wick. In order to give to the world, to do as all creatives want to do, you have to take from it first. You have to live in it, and through that find the spark of the things you want to create. Productivity is defined by the creative's self-worth, and the creative's self-worth is defined by the person beyond the creative.

"Life is what happens when you're busy making other plans" sings John Lennon in his song 'Beautiful Boy'. And it is no surprise that he so effectively harnessed his creativity throughout his career, because the ethos of that line can again be passed across contexts. In similar vein, creativity is what happens when you're busy out there doing things. Living life – not just trying to replicate and perfect it. Steal from the world and re-gift it with what you make. Steal like an artist. Pickpocket experiences and claim them as your own. It is the duty of the creative to research empirically. Gather ideas by gathering reflective thoughts on experiences. Find frames by letting things linger as if trapped in one twenty-fourth of a second. If 'acting is reacting' then creating is recreating. Live a life that will let you create, find space that will allow you the privilege of being creative. The raised heart rate of running wild is a lot easier to two-step along to than the thought-thwarted thud of staring at fading grey walls with a moss-gathering biro in hand. Nowadays, waking up before the rooster has even sipped its night cap, bench pressing a JCB up to failure and hand-scribing every tale of Arabian Knights – all before having one thimble full of raw chia seeds for breakfast – would be a routine plastered on LinkedIn and hailed as "good graft" while simultaneously being plastered on your face as "unsustainably unhealthy". And if that routine works, it works. Do you. Bills and responsibilities demand routines that maybe don't cosy up with our circadian rhythms. But don't feel the pressure to use that "graft" as a measurement of your progress or productivity. Amidst the cacophony of the everyday, seek the symphony of spontaneity and experiences and feeling. And thus, of creativity. Be blinded by the colours until you bump the pot of gold. Look after the creative, and the creativity will look after itself.

Six years have passed, and I now spend so much time creating, and so little time worrying about it. No one ever told me that creativity felt so like life.

